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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ALGIERS 001527

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SUBJECT: LOCAL ELECTIONS 2007: A CONFUSED AND UNEVEN
PLAYING FIELD

Classified By: Ambassador Robert Ford; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: The road to the November 29 elections for Algeria's city councils and provincial (state) legislatures is fraught with confusion, a lack of transparency and allegations of injustice surrounding the candidate lists proposed by the competing parties. Senior political leaders echo the man on the street in acknowledging that the public has much less faith in the ballot box as a means of effecting the change so many view as critical. Opposition parties are either not allowed to or lack the resources to gain equal time in the media. Finally, significant gaps have emerged in the ability of central political party structures to control local candidate lists, empowering the whims of the partisan local election officials who control the process at the periphery. The parliamentary elections in May never gained much public interest and voter turnout was only about 35 percent. In the wake of those elections, many Algerian politicians and officials comforted themselves with the thought that historically voters come out in bigger numbers to elect Algerian city councils and state legislatures. Ambassador told former Prime Minister Ouyahia, a key inside player, that we would watch the local election process with great interest in its fairness and credibility. Thus, again observers here are focusing on the voter turnout as the big indicator of whether Algeria's political system is getting any traction at the street level or instead is becoming entirely irrelevant to a public already weary of economic and social hardships.
END SUMMARY.

12. (C) As required by statute, all political parties struggled to file their slate of candidates by the October 9 deadline, 50 days before the scheduled elections. The print media buzzed with allegations of foul play from the opposition parties, but these parties were not allowed any television time to make their case. Karim Tabbou, the operational director of the Front des Forces Socialistes (FFS), Algeria's oldest opposition party, told PolChief on October 17 that the FFS presented lists in some 30 wilayas (provinces) but had ten of them rejected for various procedural reasons. The FFS has taken its case directly to the highest level, meeting with Prime Minister Belkhadem on October 17 to push for a more transparent and user-friendly process and urge Belkhadem to accept the rejected lists of all parties. Belkhadem, himself the head of the ruling FLN party coalition, said he would get back to them within "a few days."

DO YOU HAVE WHAT IT TAKES TO BE A CANDIDATE?

13. (C) Islamist Society of Peace Movement (MSP) Party leader and Minister-at-large Abujarra Soltani told Ambassador and PolEc on October 16 that the process of accepting candidates at local districts across the country is confusing and unbelievably bureaucratic. In order to be accepted, candidates must present six pieces of identification, including their own birth certificate, their father's birth certificate, and their grandfather's. (Moreover, his aide noted, these papers can only be obtained by physically going to the cities where the original birth certificates were issued.) Tabbou of the FFS pointed out that all documents must be presented in Arabic, while the transition from French to Arabic as official national language has not yet completely seeped through the national bureaucracy. Documents in French must be accompanied by officially-approved Arabic translations. Tabbou alleged that these requirements were being exploited by local officials to reject candidates in a capricious and random manner. Tabbou described several specific cases from around the country where the entire FFS list was rejected because the Arabic transliteration of an original French document was deemed imprecise or incorrect. Other anecdotes involve candidates rejected for not being present at precisely the same time as the party slate documents, even though both were present before the midnight deadline in front of the same officials.

UNEVEN APPLICATION OF PROCEDURES

14. (C) Tabbou echoed what French language daily El Watan reported on October 10 - that the unwieldy bureaucratic

ALGIERS 00001527 002 OF 004

requirements for becoming a candidate, combined with general popular cynicism about the ability of the local elections to achieve anything other than a predictable, inevitable result, left parties struggling to find candidates willing to put themselves forward. In the two weeks immediately preceding the October 9 deadline, PolEc FSNs were themselves approached in their neighborhood streets by opposition parties such as the Worker's Party (PT), desperate to add names to their depleted slates. The first question they were asked, even before their name, was whether or not they had university or graduate degrees. In the run-up to the elections, slates are visible in local municipalities and are often published in local flyers or newspapers, with candidates' educational qualifications trumpeted in the little space next to their names.

15. (C) Soltani, the head of one of the three parties of President Bouteflika's ruling coalition, was extremely pessimistic about the pre-election mood. Soltani and his aide, Dahman Abdelrahmane, told us that as the MSP assembled its lists it found some provincial officials relatively flexible about which documents they would accept. Only in Bejaia (an FFS stronghold) did they face serious problems, according to Soltani. These two Islamist politicians said the process was uneven and haphazard not because of a central government instruction but rather because of regular Algerian administrative laxity and the cultural norm of doing friends favors. Maybe in ten or twenty years, Soltani mused, Algeria will have an administration that truly can conduct a fair democratic election.

16. (C) Minister Soltani appeared more worried about maintaining the credibility of the system itself. According to Soltani, Algerians - youth in particular - do not believe their vote will put bread on their table, nor do they feel that a credible alternative exists. The problem, according to Soltani, is that Algerian youth are not stupid. Through television and the internet, they are aware of how the rest of the world lives, and they know that skyrocketing oil revenues have brought incredible wealth to Algeria but they still suffer from crushing unemployment, housing shortages

and above all an inability to start their own families.
(Note: Soltani himself is frustrated, considered stuck in the middle of the current Algerian political scene - as a "tamed" Islamist, he is viewed as too conservative for the regime's tastes, but as part of the government he is considered not conservative enough by the fragmented religious opposition. Another MSP leader, Ahmed Boulayl, told us October 17 that the MSP is hurting on the street because many Algerians doubt its bonafides as a party of change when the MSP itself is in the ruling parliamentary coalition. End note.)

A MORE SANGUINE VIEW FROM A SYSTEM INSIDER

17. (C) In his October 16 meeting with Ambassador, former Prime Minister and government coalition RND party leader Ouyahia acknowledged that the May 2007 parliamentary election turnout was disappointing but he discounted to us that the political system had stopped evolving in a way to maintain its relevance. He noted that parliamentary election turnout in more advanced democracies was usually relatively low (a point Interior Minister Zerhouni emphasized right after the May 2007 results were announced). Ouyahia, like other insiders here, point to the higher voter turnout historically for city council and provincial legislature elections. Ouyahia said the biggest challenge for the Algerian political system was to find a way to explain to the public that everyone had to work hard together to build Algeria. The prevalence of cynicism makes this especially difficult, he admitted. Ouyahia said he expected - and hoped - that voter turnout on November 29 would be around 45 percent. Ambassador told Ouyahia that the U.S. would watch the local election process carefully with a view to how the process evolved and whether or not Algerians found it credible. Recalling how Islamist victories in local elections in 1990 left the country poised for crisis by 1991, the Ambassador noted that opening the system too fast might be destabilizing, but leaving the opposition less room in 2007 than it had a few years ago would be destabilizing too. Ouyahia agreed that the political system has to keep evolving gradually. (Comment: Ouyahia is no big friend of President

ALGIERS 00001527 003 OF 004

Bouteflika but the former prime minister has plenty of ties to the omnipresent security services and to civilian administrators within the system. End Comment.)

THE PERIPHERY TRIUMPHS OVER THE CENTER

18. (C) Tabbou echoed Soltani's cynicism, saying that local election officials, themselves driven by the prevailing local political forces of their own affiliation and the dominant party in that particular region, ultimately have the final say, and their decisions are unpredictable, exploiting a variety of bureaucratic details to tailor the local process to suit their ends. Not even intervention by the Interior Ministry or Prime Minister Belkhadem himself has been able to change this equation in many cases. A well-connected Embassy contact in Oran outlined the triumph of regional struggles within the FLN party, the predominant political party nationally. Local FLN officials loyal to Oran Mayor Boukhatem mutinied against Prime Minister Belkhadem's central FLN party apparatus in Algiers. The result was a slate of candidates not culled from Belkhadem's favorites, but rather from among local party loyalists, many of whom are sympathetic to Belkhadem's rival, former Prime Minister Ali Benflis. (Comment: multiple sources tell us that President Bouteflika detests Benflis after Benflis mounted a serious challenge to him in the 2004 presidential election. End Comment.) Not even a recent Belkhadem visit to the Oran region prior to the October 9 deadline was able to resolve internal FLN squabbling in the region. Tabbou pointed out that all party lists were accepted in Algiers, since "it is much harder to play games in the capital" than it is in the rest of the country.

A CRIPPLED, NARCISSISTIC MEDIA

19. (C) Tabbou said that opposition parties such as the FFS and RCD were trying to use the media as much as possible to highlight their concerns and push for greater transparency. Tabbou himself gave a press conference on October 17 immediately after presenting FFS complaints to Prime Minister Belkhadem. However, Tabbou pointed out that the FFS had not been granted time on state-controlled television for the past four years, leaving him to rely on foreign media and Algeria's print media, much of which he described as ineffective and biased, though dynamic and "noisy." In a meeting with Ambassador and PolEc on October 17, National Democratic Rally (RND) leader Ahmed Ouyahia described the print media's coverage of the local election preparations as "narcissistic," saying it was always quick to present itself as the defender of justice and truth and paint political parties and the elections in broad, non-subtle strokes as ineffective, unjust and rigged.

HELP FROM ABROAD BLOCKED

10. (C) Of the early September FFS party congress, designed to inject new vigor into the party for both the coming local elections as well as the 2009 presidential elections, Tabbou highlighted the critical role for foreign support to promote transparency and create viable alternatives. European officials were scheduled to appear at the September congress to show their support, but these officials were not granted visas, according to Tabbou, reflecting a GOA desire to keep the opposition on a leash. Soltani and Tabbou both said that public statements of criticism by foreign ambassadors or leaders would be counterproductive and might even have adverse effects. They both opined that studies done by foreign think tanks might help Algeria towards greater political liberalization. Soltani also suggested that engagement with Algerian think tanks such as the National Institute for Global Strategic Studies (INESG) might provide the best opportunity for exchange and transformation, in addition to the ongoing programs of the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) within the MEPI context. Soltani also urged more English Language programs and a dramatic increase in exchanges of all kinds as the best way for the U.S. to promote reform in Algeria.

COMMENT: A BIG TEST FOR THE SYSTEM

ALGIERS 00001527 004 OF 004

11. (C) On the surface, there appears to be much lively discussion about an ongoing local elections process whose flaws are at least aired publicly in the written media. However, this discussion is largely theoretical, since the media can't compel the administration to implement changes in the electoral process. Local party officials have been successful in imposing their will on the party slates submitted thus far, drawing justification at will from a wide menu of unwieldy bureaucratic requirements. Election day is still six weeks away, but our limited soundings suggest public interest is about as low as it was prior to the May 2007 parliament election. Turnout in the November 29 local elections could, therefore, again be very low. If turnout is again low, internal dissension within the political parties will likely grow as more Algerians come to the conclusion that the political system, dominated by Bouteflika and the FLN with the ready buy-in of players like Ouyahia and his RND party, is dead in the water.

FORD